

5 Reasons Why the Medieval Church Was So Powerful

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After the [fall of the Roman empire](#) in the fifth century, the Medieval Church saw a rise in status and power. With Roman Catholic ideals, the Church in the Medieval ages was seen as an intermediary between God and the people, as well as the idea that clergy were the so-called 'gatekeepers to heaven', filled people with a combination of respect, awe and fear.

This was coupled with there being a power vacuum in Europe: no monarchy rose to fill the space left. Instead, the Medieval Church, began to grow in power and influence, eventually becoming the dominant power in Europe (although this was not without struggle). Like the Romans they had their capital in Rome and they had their own emperor – the Pope.

1. Wealth



Christianization of Poland. A.D. 966., by Jan Matejko, 1888-89

Image Credit: Jan Matejko, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The Catholic Church in Medieval times was extremely wealthy. Monetary donations were given by many levels of society, most commonly in the form of a tithe, a tax which normally saw people give roughly 10% of their earnings to the Church.

The Church placed value on beautiful material possessions, believing art and beauty was for the glory of God. Churches were constructed by fine craftsmen and filled with precious objects to reflect the Church's high status within society.

This system was not without fault: whilst greed was a sin, the Church made sure to financially profit where possible. The sale of indulgences, papers which promised absolution from sin yet to be committed and an easier route to heaven, proved increasingly controversial. Martin Luther later attacked the practice in his 95 Theses.

However, the Church also was one of the main distributors of charity at the time,

giving alms to those in need and running basic hospitals, as well as temporarily housing travellers and providing places of shelter and sanctity.

2. Education

Many clergy had some level of education: much of the literature produced at the time came from the Church, and those who entered the clergy were offered the chance to learn to read and write: a rare opportunity in the agrarian society of the Medieval period.

Monasteries in particular often had schools attached, and monastic libraries were widely regarded as some of the best. Then as now, education was a key factor in the limited social mobility offered in Medieval society. Those accepted into the monastic life also had a more stable, more privileged life than ordinary people.



An altarpiece in Ascoli Piceno, Italy, by Carlo Crivelli (15th century)

Image Credit: Carlo Crivelli, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

3. Community

By the turn of the millennia (c. 1000AD), society was increasingly orientated around the church. Parishes were made up of village communities, and the Church was a focal point in peoples' lives. Churchgoing was a chance to see people, there would be celebrations organised on saints' days and 'holy days' were exempt from work.

4. Power

The Church demanded that all accept its authority. Dissent was treated harshly, and non-Christians faced persecution, but increasingly sources suggest that many people did not blindly accept all Church teachings.

Monarchs were no exception to papal authority, and they were expected to communicate with and respect the Pope including monarchs of the day. The clergy swore allegiance to the Pope rather than to their King. Having the Papacy on side during a dispute was important: during the Norman invasion of England, King Harold was excommunicated for supposedly going back on a holy pledge to support [William of Normandy's](#) invasion of England: the [Norman invasion](#) was blessed as a holy crusade by the Papacy.

Excommunication remained a sincere and worrying threat to monarchs of the time: as God's representative on earth, the Pope could prevent souls from entering Heaven by casting them out of the Christian community. The very real fear of hell (as often seen in Doom Paintings) kept people in line with doctrine and ensured obedience to the Church.



15th-century painting of Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont (1095)

Image Credit: Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The Church could even mobilise Europe's most wealthy people to fight on their behalf. During the crusades, Pope Urban II promised eternal salvation to those who fought in the name of the Church in the Holy Land.

Kings, noblemen and princes fell over themselves to take up the Catholic standard in the quest to reclaim Jerusalem.

5. Church vs State

The size, wealth and power of the church led to increasingly great corruption in the course of the middle ages.

In response to this dissent arose eventually formed around a 16th century German priest Martin Luther.

Luther's prominence brought together disparate groups opposed to the Church

and led to [the Reformation](#) which saw a number of European states, particularly in the north, finally break away from the central authority of the Roman Church, although they remained zealously Christian.



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The dichotomy between Church and State remained (and remains) a point of contention, and by the late Middle Ages, there were increasing challenges to the Church's power: Martin Luther formally recognised the idea of the 'doctrine of two kingdoms', and Henry VIII was the first major monarch in Christendom to formally separate from the Catholic Church.

Despite these changes in the balance of power, the Church retained authority and wealth across the world, and the Catholic Church is believed to have well over 1 billion adherents in the modern world.



Eleanor Janega visits the city of Oxford to explore the lives of the clergy in Medieval England.

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